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(New Mexico) MVD office thefts spike

SANTA FE - A handful of Southwest states, including New Mexico, are banding together to investigate a recent spike in burglaries and armed robberies of Motor Vehicle Division offices that have delivered thousands of official documents, equipment and IDs into the hands of thieves.

"There is an underground market where ID cards are highly coveted and sold for very high prices," said Jason King, spokesman for the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators.

"Thieves are looking at the next best way to forge identification credentials, and one way to do that would be to steal from the MVD."

Two thefts from Arizona MVD offices in 2005 counted as a spike in that state.

The same number occurred in Colorado.

New Mexico, though, has logged at least seven thefts, burglaries or robberies from an MVD office or contractor this year. According to records from MVD, they logged five incidents in 2005 and two in 2004.

According to records obtained by The Tribune, 24,957 out-of-state titles have been stolen since 2000 and about 1,300 blank driver's licenses have been snatched since 2004, along with a pile of equipment used to make licenses.

During the past 22 years, 14,309 blank New Mexico titles have disappeared, according to the records.

Last month, state MVD Director Ken Ortiz said the official computers, printers, cameras and hologram rolls on the underground market aren't a danger to national security.

"Even though they broke in, even though they stole it, it's useless," Ortiz said in an interview in September. He was not available for comment Tuesday.

Ortiz has said vehicle titles have unique identifying numbers that, when reported stolen, won't be accepted by MVD computers.

He said MVD offices, whether state- or privately run, are required to have security measures, which range from alarm systems to key-controlled access. And stolen computers that aren't hooked to the MVD network shut down and lock up.

But locking doors and safes for money storage haven't stop armed robbers who have hit MVDs in Albuquerque and Arizona.

In July 2005, gunmen robbed the MVD at 5917 Lomas Blvd. N.E. of 68 blank car titles and 47 blank boat titles, according to an Albuquerque police report.

Theft from Arizona MVDs have jumped in the past year-and-a-half, said Cydney DeModica, spokeswoman for Arizona's Motor Vehicle Division.

"We've even had a couple during broad daylight where they run in and, in one case, sprayed pepper spray on employees," DeModica said. "It seems like it's an issue that's growing across the nation."

In Arizona, however, she added, "we haven't seen the volume you're seeing in New Mexico."



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Though she couldn't reveal exact numbers of thefts or stolen items because of an ongoing investigation, she said the frequency and audacity of thefts has been increasing.

Her state attributes the rise in thefts to tighter licensing and titling procedures.

"So the people who want to get their hands on these fraudulent documents are going to go to whatever lengths it takes," she said.

In New Mexico, the state Taxation and Revenue Department in 2005 created a team of auditors and investigators within the Tax Fraud Investigation Division. The department has contracted with the University of New Mexico Anderson Schools of Management to randomly audit MVD offices.

In addition, the department in recent years implemented a slew of system security measures, including a network intrusion detector to notify the department of any breaches in computer security.

It works with the state Auditor's Office on each burglary to take corrective action and bring the perpetrators to justice.

The threat of such thefts has pushed a handful of states, including Colorado, to stop issuing licenses and some titles from the offices altogether.

Though Colorado has seen just two burglaries of driver's license equipment since 2000, according to Colorado Department of Motor Vehicles spokeswoman Diane Reimer, the state now contracts out the license printing; that way the highly desired materials aren't in the offices.

Utah also uses a third-party vendor and hasn't seen any burglaries in recent years, said Nannette Rolfe, director of the Department of Public Safety Drivers License Division.

And in Oklahoma - after several break-ins and thousands of fraudulent licenses were made over several years - the state in 2003 installed finger image matching.

The system requires an employee to scan his or her finger for every transaction, said Lonnie Jarman, director of driver's licensing at the Oklahoma Department of Public Safety.

"Once we got that finger imaging in place, we were able to crack down on fraudulent licenses," he said.

The state also doesn't store driver transaction information on a hard drive, Jarman said.

"They break in; steal our computers; they get absolutely nothing," he said.

King, of the administrators association, said the third-party system in several states is in direct response to thefts from MVD offices.

He expects more states to choose this option, which leaves consumers waiting weeks to receive their license, similar to the wait to receive a credit card.

The agency has yet to begin a study of thefts and burglaries, King said.

Nor has a national task force been created to log all the thefts in the country.

"But we know the folks that are stealing those credentials they are not doing it to create driver's licenses to allow someone to drive," King said.

New Mexico in 2005 ranked 12th in the nation for the number of reported identity theft victims per 100,000 people. That year, 1,634 people said they had their identity stolen, according to data kept by the Federal Trade Commission.

Most of the victims - 685 - live in Albuquerque and most - 32 percent - were between 18 and 29 years old. Of those cases, the FTC says nearly 3 percent involved a fraudulent driver's license. That figure is down slightly from 2004, when 3.4 percent of cases involved driver's licenses.

The state Attorney General's Office said it has received 17 complaints of identity theft in the past two years